Between the Woods by blithers

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A conversation in dark woods, while Joyce and Hopper look for Will.

Between the Woods

Author's Note:

- For ishie.

> *Between the woods and frozen lake*
> *The darkest evening of the year.*
> - "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost

The woods are dark and strung with things that move in the corner of Joyce's eye.

Joyce feels like she's moving underwater, the world muffled beneath a thin layer of flexible plastic. The hazmat suit is bulky and awkward, and makes her sweat uncomfortably where the rubber touches her bare skin. Hopper isn't saying much next to her. His face is compressed into a grim line of determination, trudging forward.

The interior lights in Hopper's faceplate carve eerie shadows on his face. A thin film of moisture beads on the inside of his breathing mask, obscuring the lower half of his features. The light catches indistinctly on the line of his jaw and the shadow of his beard and mustache, throwing his brows into heavy relief.

It makes him look decades older than the boy she's known in high school, the troublemaker with the propensity to throw a punch rather than talk about his problems. Sometimes she can catch occasional, strange glimpses of the person she'd known: in the stubborn gleam in his eye, in the way his mouth still sometimes gets ahead of his brain. But that's been tempered with age and sorrow and the sort of beard she could have never imagined Hop would grow into.

She wonders, sometimes, what he sees when he looks at her. The girl who never left town. The abandoned wife, the teenage mother, her life etched in lines around her eyes.

She shouldn't be thinking about that.

“You doing okay?” he asks. They’re approaching the outskirts of town, following the increasingly-spotty line of inky blood.

“Yeah.” She waves him off. “I’m fine.”

Something about her voice must sound strange, because Hopper turns to face her. She can hear her own breathing then, amplified in the darkness and a bit wild.

“Where’s the trail?” she asks instead.

Hopper swings his flashlight back to the ground, then around in a widening circle. Joyce turns with the beam of light. No blood.

“Fuck,” she says. “Fuck!”

“It’s okay.” His response is automatic. “We’ll pick up the trail again.”

“But what if we don’t?”

“We will,” he says, firm and calm, like there’s no question to it at all.

Joyce sits down on the curb at the corner of Main and Aspen, the woods fading into the beginning of town around them. Spores surround her like a snow globe, and the beauty of the dancing white just makes everything worse. She hates this world like she’s hated nothing else in her life. Not Lonnie, not even when he’d left her alone with two kids and a minimum wage job and the small life she’d had to fight for tooth and nail. She hates this malevolent world with its buildings and branches dripping black, and the white spores that circle them like ash. She hates this world for existing, for taking Will away from her. She hates it, she hates it, she *hates* it.

Hopper backtracks down Main Street, flashlight pointed at his feet, and makes a couple abortive forays spiraling out from the last spot of blood they found. He returns to sit next to her.

Joyce shivers.

“Thing was bleeding like a stuck pig,” Hopper says, as much to himself, she thinks, as her. “Can’t have gotten far.”

Joyce nods, dimly, and wishes desperately for a cigarette. For something to do with her hands. For the warmth of a lit smoke.

“This world is so cold,” she says. “When I think of Will… when I think of him…”

“Hey. Hey, now.” Hopper wraps an arm around her, and the plastic of their suits squeaks against each other.

She can’t seem to stop shivering now that she’s started, her jaw clenched. The cold, unfeeling moisture of this world curls around her bones. The hazmat suit sticks unpleasantly to her skin where she’d been sweating.

Hopper shuffles closer to her on the curb, his hip solid against hers.

Joyce scrambles for her feet, fighting the urge to melt into Hopper’s side and never move again. “We need to find Will.”

Hopper tugs her back down next to him. “Sit a minute,” he says. “You’re no good to me or yourself like this.”

“But Will is *out there*, Hop. I can feel it.”

“Just a couple minutes,” Hopper says.

Joyce sits back down.

Her fingers twitch, and she taps down an unseen cigarette against her hazmat-suited knee.

“What is this place, anyway?”

Hopper looks around, and she can feel the weight of the silence in the darkness around them, the layer of slime settled like oil over the surface of the world she knows so well. “I don’t know.”

“How are there… our buildings? How is this our town?”

Hopper shifts against her side.

“There are cars here,” she continues. “My *bed* was in my house. Who

sleeps in it here?"

"Joyce…"

They sit in silence after that. Joyce catches one of the white spore-things in her fingers, and rubs at it like a snowflake. It dissolves against the plastic, leaving a wet residue on her fingertips.

"I've never lived anyplace other than Hawkins," she says. "This place is *wrong*. It's my home, but twisted up. It's all wrong, Hop." She shifts against him. "It was those fuckers at the energy lab. Those evil government fucks. They created this."

Joyce thinks he isn't going to answer her until he says, finally, "I felt that way about Hawkins when I moved back, you know. About it being the town I'd known, but…" He hesitates. "After Sarah died, coming back here, everything here felt wrong then, too. Darker."

"What are you saying?"

He shrugs. "Maybe those people didn't create this place."

"They're evil," she points out, practical to the bone.

"*This* place, though. It's a different kind of evil than those men are. It feels like the sort of evil that's always been here."

He adjusts his arm around her shoulder.

"Do you ever…" he starts to say, then cuts himself off.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Do I ever what, Hop?"

"Do you ever wish you'd left? Hawkins, I mean." He gestures around them, a bit ironically, at the black grease of the decaying world that surrounds them.

She's surprised. Out of all the things she was sure the two of them

would never talk about again, that night with the two of them in Hop's pickup truck was at the top of the list.

"No," she says, then hesitates.

He snorts, the first sound of amusement she's heard in what feels like years. She bristles, unexpectedly stung.

"For all that Lonnie gave me fuck-all else, he did give me Jonathan and Will. And I wouldn't trade the two of them for the world, Hop. Not for anything."

"I get that. I do get that, Joyce."

His tone softens her. She eyes him; the blue lights illuminating his gas-masked face remind her of the sci-fi movies she catches bits of sometimes at night, falling asleep with a beer in her hand and some stilted actor's line about the end of the world in her ears, because some teenager had missed their shift at work again and she'd had to stay late to close up one more time.

"I know you do," she says. Then, because the eerie emptiness surrounding them makes her feel honest and a bit unreal, she says something she thought she'd never tell him, like she's confessing a secret in church. "Sometimes I wonder what would have happened. If I'd left with you that night."

She feels the shifting of his shoulders underneath her cheek.

"I think about that sometimes too," he says finally. "I wouldn't change anything either, but sometimes - I can't help it. I think about things."

She's quiet after that, remembering the boy he'd been back then. How he'd fought back so hard against Hawkins, at the inertia that this town sunk into your bones like hooks. How he'd looked at her that night when he'd told her that the two of them could leave this place and never come back. He'd said that Hawkins was a trap. That this town would never let the two of them go.

Spores stick to the plastic of Hopper's hazmat suit like snow. She reaches over and brushes off his knee.

“Joyce?” Hopper asks. “You good?”

Joyce looks down the street ahead of them, and shadows curl in on themselves in the distance. She nods. “Yeah. I think so.”

"We're going to find him," Hopper says, and there is a hard promise in his voice. "One way or another, I am going to find your son."

"I know we will," she says. "I can feel it, Hop. Will is here, and we're going to find him." She can hear the truth in her own voice then, like a ray of sunlight in this black, awful place.

He stands up next to her, resettling his gun and flashlight. “C'mon. Let’s backtrack a bit and see if we can’t pick up that thing’s trail again.”

Hopper holds his hand to her, and she takes it.